Lily "White": Commodity Racism and the Construction of Female Domesticity in *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*

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BLACK FEMINIST-SCHOLAR PATRICIA HILL COLLINS INSISTS THAT FEMALE identity is a complex construction, an intersectional positionality that implicates race and ethnicity as well as class and gender. I want to focus here on the production of two very specific female commodities in the contemporary United States, that of the housewife and the domestic servant. In this article, I will examine women's domestic labor within the home, using the idea of commodity racism to open a dialogue about the roles domestic work and consumption play in constructing racialized identities for women-of-color domestic workers and the women who employ them. Commodity racism stems from the cultural associations between certain domestic products and their implication in discourses of race and whiteness. I will use the film *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* (1981) as a framing device to examine how these racialized distinctions play out in the domestic sphere within the film and in the larger cultural world outside of it.

In *Performing Whiteness*, film scholar Gwendolyn Audrey Foster discusses images of the white body and explores the ways in which Hollywood cinema has historically constructed whiteness as a cultural norm. Foster argues that marginalized B-movies and exploitation films exist in opposition to mainstream Hollywood constructions of hegemonic whiteness, usually science-fiction and horror films that she deems "bad-white-body" films. These films work by not only exposing the fissures in mainstream Hollywood cinematic and cultural constructions

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of whiteness, but also by foregrounding the instability of the white body as a unitary and unproblematic whole. Bad-white-bodies refuse to be integrated into hegemonic whiteness. Foster goes on to say that these types of films "have much to teach us about our attitudes toward the body and the ways in which it is colonized, gendered, raced, classed, and socialized" (68).

Close reading of the Lily Tomlin film *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* exposes the ways in which the film not only adheres to main tenets of the "bad-white-body" film, but also additionally constructs its critique of consumerism around specific constructions of white female domesticity. In order to fully appreciate the film's subversion of the white body and its implications for commodity racism, one must understand the ways in which white female domesticity and the racial division of domestic labor have been historically constructed through consumerism. *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* subverts hegemonic white female domesticity by attacking the ways in which that identity is constructed through specific consumer technologies and racial divisions of labor in the domestic space. Such an approach has a clear precedent in postcolonial scholarship as seen in Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* which speaks to the imperial projects of British Empire. She argues that commodity racism within consumer capitalism has effectively supplanted much of the scientific racism of the past. She offers numerous examples of explicitly racial appeals in British advertising for soap, cleansers, tea, and other commercial products. Indeed, the confines of the domestic space and its technologies bring the colonial project of whiteness into rehearsal in the home.

The Incredible Shrinking Woman anticipates the global market in female domestic workers that we have seen unfold in the twenty-five years since its initial release. Seen in this way, whiteness and commodity racism move to the center of the film's satire of consumer society. First, it is necessary to place *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* among the series of films Foster deems "bad-white-body" films. Next, I will explore the importance of domestic technology and consumer and health education to the formation of white middle-class female domestic identities and how the film offers a space to question these identities through its subversion of the white body. Finally, I will examine the film's use of racial others to construct white identity. This situation mirrors the lived experience of women-of-color domestic workers in that past and has specific implications for the contemporary

global market in these types of laborers and the overall consumption of immigrant women of color as global commodities.

Performing Whiteness: (Re) Producing the White Body

In her essay "Lily Tomlin's *Appearing Nitely*: Performing Difference Before Difference Was Cool," Jennifer Reed speaks to Lily Tomlin's ability to provide "multiple points from which to identify" and says that, in particular, *Appearing Nitely* offers "a critique of capitalism, conventionality, naïve politics and selling out" (437). Her analysis notes that Tomlin creates characters who represent those outside mainstream culture for reasons of race, gender, age, economic status, political beliefs, or disability. For example, Tomlin's Broadway hit *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* includes a large cast of interrelated characters, including a "bag lady," a male lounge singer, a fifteen-year-old suicidal punk singer, a disillusioned 60s feminist, prostitutes, a lesbian, and others. Reed approaches Tomlin's performance from a perspective that privileges feminist conceptions of multiple subjectivity, seeing female subjects as fragmented and often contradictory. This framework provides a fruitful reading of Tomlin's work, but misses an opportunity to fully explicate Tomlin's portrayal of "difference" by failing to explore how Tomlin lampoons "whiteness" while working to "provide a critique of the culture from within that media establishment" (Reed 438). Tomlin's characters have often worked as critiques of hegemonic constructions of "white" culture and its inability to fully integrate white otherness (the disabled, the poor, gays and lesbians, the elderly, etc.). Tomlin's characters are fragments of white otherness, the missing pieces of an innately false, culturally constructed hegemonic whole. In fact, much of Tomlin's career has been built on taking on whiteness as a set of cultural expectations and myths through comedic performance, which serves to illustrate the work of film theorist Richard Dyer, often regarded as the first to engage in a prolonged analysis of visual representations of whiteness in western culture. He argued that studying whiteness and its visual and cultural representations worked to challenge it as a master narrative; one must go about "making whiteness strange" (Dyer 4). Tomlin's work consistently makes whiteness strange by making visible the fissures and weaknessness in its cultural construction. Furthermore, challenging

dominant narratives, Tomlin's work often mediates the anxieties and preoccupations of the period in which it is produced.

The Incredible Shrinking Woman was released in 1981, a year of change reflected in the swearing in of former Hollywood film star and television cowboy, Ronald Reagan, as the 40th president of the United States. Popular television series of 1981 such as *Dallas*, *Falcon Crest*, *Dynasty*, *The Jeffersons*, and *The Love Boat* reflected a cultural obsession with wealth, leisure, and consumption that would become the cultural legacy of the Reagan era. Furthermore, in the early 1980s, women were seemingly being put back in their place: the Equal Rights Amendment failed in 1982, and the cultural and political role of the American woman in society was in limbo due to the waning of second wave feminism; while her identity as a consumer seemed to be cementing itself firmly in the new decade. *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* defied this paradigm. The film portrays a white body out of control, the oppressive powers of consumer capitalism and patriarchy, and the absurdities of medical and consumer science. In short, *The Incredible Shrinking Woman's* satire of consumerism and dull domesticity, with its usurpation of the white body, lampooned the emerging ideological and economic confidence of the new decade.

The Incredible Shrinking Woman is very loosely based on a novel by Richard Matheson, which was made into the film *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957). On the surface, the 1957 version is a cautionary tale about the disastrous effects of radiation from nuclear blasts. In the original, Scott Carey (Grant Williams) is sprayed with a radioactive mist that undermines his masculine power and ruins his marriage; this is all the responsibility of bad-white science. According to Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, this film and others like it form a body of work she labels "bad-white-body" films. She writes,

> Bad-white-body films challenge the integrity of the body and the wholeness of identity as much as they challenge the integrity and wholeness of whiteness. They also are generated from a space that problematizes and fragments the binaries of good and bad, moral and immoral, as well as the notion of a unified performing self.
> (Foster 69)

Foster asserts that the white hegemonic power that is the legacy of classical Hollywood cinema has its fissures exposed by exploitation films like *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*. Foster says of the original

1957 version, "in a manner that is still striking today, the film encourages the audience to question the authenticity of 'truth' of the primacy of the white nuclear family in a rather postmodern way" (Foster 88). The Tomlin film works in much the same way. In the 1981 remake, rather than a radioactive mist, Lily Tomlin is sprayed with perfume and an array of other personal hygiene and cleansing agents and begins to shrink, ruining her marriage to Vance (Charles Grodin) and her relationship with her children; this is also the responsibility of bad-white science. The subtle differences between the original and the 1981 remake are telling in what they say about white hegemonic gender roles. As the character Pat Kramer, Tomlin loses her status as head of household consumption and manager of domestic technology.

Consumer Science and Consumer Capitalism as Racial Pedagogy

The Incredible Shrinking Woman opens with a trip to the supermarket in a world that seems like a never-ending commercial. Pat Kramer is shown, along with her Hispanic maid and two children, driving a station wagon full of groceries back to her suburban home in Tasty Meadows, where residents are white, consuming, and clean. On her way home, her neighbors call out for her to try "Camper Clean" and "Boat Sheen" along with "this great new stuff for the lawn." Tasty Meadows is a chemical utopia of whiteness. Pat Kramer is a prisoner of these messages; her husband is an advertising executive who brings home a plethora of new products for Pat to try out in the home. Pat seems to have it all: every product and technology one could imagine, including a maid to assist her with homemaking and childcare.

Pat returns home from the grocery store and is greeted by her next-door neighbor Judith Beasley (also played by Tomlin), a full-time consumer advocate, salesperson, and neighborhood busybody. Judith is peddling "Flo Naturalle," a line of Avon-type cosmetic products for women. She attempts to sell Pat some facial cleansers and even a feminine hygiene spray called "Breath Easy," because other leading brands, "have been known to kill cockroaches." It is, of course, implied here that it is a white woman's duty to be clean and odorless.

Tomlin, in playing both of these characters, gets to explore both sides of the historical construction of domestic middle-class whiteness:

the instructor and the instructed, a theme which became evident around the turn of the twentieth century when a number of self-appointed "consumer advocates" and "home efficiency experts" traveled around the country "educating" women. Janice Williams Rutherford writes about the career of one of these women in *Selling Mrs. Consumer: Christine Frederick and the Rise of Household Efficiency.* Christine Frederick, a spokesperson for household management, was a significant force who would shape twentieth-century America's intersection with consumer culture. She was part of the efficiency movement that transferred scientific management into the domestic sphere and promoted a modern consumer culture. Corporate America "bought" professional females like Christine Frederick as spokespersons for their products. These women promoted industry to "save the home." Rutherford writes of Frederick:

> She reflected the many currents of her time and the way they interacted to change American society. She enthusiastically embraced and promoted technology, scientific management, modernization, and consumerism. Yet she limited the ways members of her own sex could benefit from that modernization because she labored under the nineteenth-century assumption that a woman's place should be located in the home. (Rutherford 5)

In *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* Judith's consumer "watchdog" function hinges on her promoting products (ones she sells) as healthy replacements for leading brands. The contradiction here, as seen through the character of Judith Beasley, is that these advocates encouraged other women to stay home and become professional consumers while they themselves made a public career outside the home educating homemakers.

The experience of a visit from a household expert is one that is specific to a particular group, mostly middle-class white women, and promoted specific standards of cleanliness and healthfulness marketed only to whites. Christine Frederick's audience did not reflect the lives and experiences of all American women. Rutherford notes,

> Omitted here are the experiences of early-twentieth-century working-class women—many of them immigrants—who had to work to live and so could not remain at home, of African-American women who labored under racial and economic barriers that made full-time housekeeping in their homes impossible for most. (6)

Those on the racial margins of society were not seen as the proper beneficiaries of household technology at the turn of the century, but this was only part of a larger historical project of racializing consumer culture. Women took on new roles as managers as they trained themselves by turning their attention to advice-givers in magazines, seminars, and books that counseled them on the proper instruction of domestic workers. "Supervision permitted both middle-class and affluent women to forge an accommodation between the work ethic and leisure, to enjoy a measure of luxury and self-indulgence while retaining the moral authority essential to true womanhood" (Dudden 156). The housewife-as-manager helped to construct racial identities around consumption, not only for her family, but also for the domestic workers in her home. In *Domesticity and Dirt* Phyllis Palmer cautions that racialized and oppressive domestic identities "divide women from each other, they reduce their ability to form coalitions for the improvement of all women's lives" (16). Making visible the constructed nature of white middle-class domestic identity and the covert abjection of women-of-color domestic workers is an essential step in this process.

The case for racialized exclusion from mainstream consumer culture in the early twentieth century is argued eloquently in Paul R. Mullin's *Race and Affluence*:

> Perhaps the most fundamental ideological cornerstone of the ostensibly democratic consumer culture was that its mass standards of living and public politics were White. Myriad architects, agents, and benefactors of racial ideology patrolled public consumer space by imposing racially based rules on entry and participation. Codified as well as assumed, reaching from market spaces to workplaces, those rules restricted African America's economic leverage and labor and portrayed African Americans as social and genetic inferiors to Whites. (1–2)

White culture defined the symbolic meanings of commodities and their appropriate use. Identity construction through consumption was a white privilege that reinforced racial "authenticity." Proper use of commodities brought with it implied rights that were not applicable to everyone. In *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*, Judith, as consumer advocate/cosmetic salesperson, never offers the Hispanic maid, Concepcion, a sales pitch or free samples even though she is in the kitchen during the "Flo Naturalle" scene; it is clear that the products are not for

her consumption. Similarly, Concepcion is allowed to put away the groceries, but the consumption of candy, perfume, and other gifts that Vance brings home from his trip for his wife and children is the exclusive domain of the white family. She never participates in conspicuous consumption until Pat starts to shrink later in the film.

Objects of consumption are situated within their own unique sociohistorical context in which consumers are positioned in relation to the product and its attributes. One product that displays a specific racial history of social properties and material symbolism is soap. Early on in *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*, we hear Pat's children ask their mother when she will sing "little bar of soap" for them. When Pat Kramer tucks her children into bed, she finally relents and sings "Oh I Wish I Was a Little Bar of Soap" as a sort of musical bedtime story. This scene, and the insistence of the children that she continue to sing this song throughout the rest of the film, is very telling. It highlights a symbolic exchange between Pat and her children, an aspiration for perfectly pure symbolic whiteness, a racial legacy that can only be understood by looking further at the history of race and the advertisement of soap.

Since the nineteenth century, soap and other cosmetics have been sought to make white skin whiter. Creams and soaps promised white women a deep down clean so that they could not only be truly beautiful, but also pure. The purity and whiteness of toiletries was emphasized in advertisements. As Richard Dyer points out, "the racial dimensions of cosmetic advertising are brought home, partly by the invariability of having white faces in illustration, partly by the vocabulary of alabaster, milkiness and so on in the copy" (78). These images and the lexicon of the ad copy promote the purity of both the product and the desired effect it is supposed to achieve. White soaps and beauty creams have been the means through which women can attain the most ideal, most purely white, feminine beauty. But this is always an ideal, because, as Dyer notes, truly "white" whiteness is unattainable. "Whiteness as an ideal can never be attained, not only because white skin can never be true white, but because ideally white is absence: to be really, absolutely white is to be nothing" (Dyer 78). In an ironic twist on soap's promises of whiteness, in the film, Pat Kramer's "Little Bar of Soap" jingle proves to be her swan song, as she begins to shrink to nothingness the very next morning thanks to her repeated exposure to a variety of soaps and other commercial products.

This scene, and the film as a whole, takes the promise of consumer female whiteness through consumption of commodities like soap to its most absurd extreme, eventual disappearance and invisibility. In reality, in order to prop up whiteness and its association with soap as a consumer ideal, racial advertising was often employed.

Historically, soap has been invested with all manner of magical and even fetishistic powers, as Anne McClintock points out in *Imperial Leather*, "At the beginning of the nineteenth century, soap was a scarce and humdrum item and washing a cursory activity at best. A few decades later, the manufacture of soap had burgeoned into an imperial commerce" (207). This shift in the symbolic properties of soap in the Victorian era illustrates just how swiftly the use of commodities can become commonplace, and in addition, racially coded. By virtue of advertising, soap became a marker of civilization itself. McClintock is interested in exactly how soap advertising in Britain went about reinscribing racial difference while promoting commodity racism and imperialism. She writes, "soap flourished not only because it created and filled a spectacular gap in the domestic market but also because, as a cheap and portable domestic commodity, it could persuasively mediate the Victorian poetics of racial hygiene and imperial progress" (McClintock 209). Soap's status as a domestic product for cleaning made it an ideal symbol for British national identity and racial and imperial superiority, and the racial imagery used in soap advertising reinforced this relationship. "From the outset, soap took shape as a technology of social purification, inextricably entwined with the semiotics of imperial racism and class denigration" (McClintock 210). McClintock's text includes graphics of vintage advertising where humor develops from the "natives" and their improper use of soap. An African Native, in one particular advertising image, seems confused by the concept of soap, and this confusion works to underscore the legitimacy of the British imperial project on the African continent.

It is especially interesting to see, as in the case of the imperial discourse surrounding soap, how the imperial projects of nations can be played out in miniature in the domestic sphere. In the past,

> various ideologues attempted to reproduce the illusion of unique White racial and social capacity by denying African Americans symbolic comprehension of genteel material culture; that is, African Americans might possess genteel objects, but they inevitably were

> unable to "correctly" define and use them because material symbolism was itself racially exclusive. (Mullins 48)

I will return to the notion of "correct use" later. I now wish to focus specifically on the historic racial exclusivity involved in the advertising and consumption of soap. This "correct" and appropriate use of soap as a commercial commodity, with its material symbolism of domestic whiteness and racial exclusivity, is underscored in the "Little Bar of Soap" song in *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*. In this comedy, however, the efficacy of the white symbolism of soap is undermined when Pat Kramer begins to shrink due to exposure to these very same domestic products. Doctors explain to Pat that chemical reactions among the numerous personal hygiene products she has been exposed to are causing her shrinking. At one point Pat becomes so small that Concepcion, the Hispanic maid, takes over tucking the children into bed. We hear her singing "Little Bar of Soap" to the children in mangled English. Because of the film's reversal of domestic whiteness she is afforded a space from which to take part in this otherwise racially exclusive symbolic exchange. However, the inadequate nature of Concepcion's rendition of the song also underscores the notion of "proper use." Her attempts to reproduce whiteness in the home are innately flawed and incomplete because of the overdetermined racial construction of her character and the work she performs. The ultimate humiliation for Pat is having Concepcion, her Latina maid, take over her maternal duties in this way. It is through Concepcion's flawed appropriation of song and Pat Kramer's inability to perform it any longer that the song's symbolic significance is exposed and undermined.

I turn now to another moment of domestic gatekeeping in *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* that carries similar historic and racial implications. Before she begins to shrink, Pat Kramer hosts a monthly block meeting where all of the (white) residents of Tasty Meadows get together to discuss neighborhood improvement. The scene includes a hilarious exchange between Judith Beasley, who presides over the meeting, and another female neighbor, Ms. Wicks, regarding Wick's neglect in cleaning her dog's feces off the sidewalk:

> Judith: Ms. Wicks, I do believe there were several times last month that you neglected to clean up after your dog.
>
> Ms. Wicks: It was just one rainy day . . .

> Judith: You know, it grieves me to see a grown woman cheapen herself by lying in front of her neighbors.

It is clear that Judith Beasley has appointed herself as gatekeeper within this white neighborhood as she rattles off all of the dates on which she found the "offensive evidence" that her neighbor had not cleaned up after her dog. Here, it is clear that good middle-class white women must be staunch gatekeepers, keeping abject elements out of the neighborhood and away from white bodies.

Such hygienic policing has an interesting history, as outlined in Nancy Tomes' *The Gospel of Germs*. Tomes charts the history of the "gospel of germs," a narrative of how our modern conceptions of responsibility for public health developed between 1890 and 1930, a period she refers to as the "golden era" of the American public health movement (6). During this period, the science of germs made its way into the private sphere of the home as a "reformation of individual and household hygiene" (Tomes 6). The sanitary sciences of the household were often spread by self-appointed apostles like the Judith Beasley character in the film or Christine Frederick, the consumer science educator discussed earlier. Tomes notes, "although it was portrayed as a set of obligations that both sexes had to honor, the kind of cleanliness required by the gospel of germs clearly had more profound implications for women, both as private citizens and professionals" (10). Simple household cleaning tasks took on deeper meaning as the association between housebound diseases and housekeeping was made more apparent. This physical and emotional burden was played upon by commercial forces that sold all manner of devices and solutions to an increasingly germ-conscious American family.

Framing the gospel of germs in this way practically ensured the exclusion of certain races and classes of citizens. "The ability to conform to 'antiseptic' standards of cleanliness differentiated rich from poor, educated from unschooled, American-born from foreign-born" (Tomes 11). The legacy of a racialized gospel of germs plays out in the "block meeting" scene in *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*. We see Concepcion serving the neighbors coffee during the meeting, but she is excluded from their conversation about neighborhood health. During this scene, her carpool arrives, a group of other Hispanic domestics and laborers, and they stand outside the home, behind a screen door, as Pat Kramer calls for Concepcion to get her things and go. They are never

invited inside but rather watch the all-white meeting quizzically through the screen. Though most domestics are the foot soldiers in contemporary battles for household cleanliness, educating the white citizens about healthy neighborhoods is the imperative here. The house-proud suburbanites in this film inherited their ancestors' notions that a clean home and neighborhood, sanitary superiority, is a cherished mark of racial and class distinction and identity.

All told, no matter who actually performs the labor, it has been the white woman, as exemplar of moral authority and purity, who must direct the cleaning and day-to-day policing of her home for impurities, germs, and dirt. Tomes writes:

> The equation of meticulous housekeeping with disease prevention also helps to explain the often strident tone privileged women brought to the already tense relations with their working-class servants. Lapses in cleaning not only transgressed the code of gentility and endangered the family's social standing; they also put the household at risk for potentially mortal "filth" disease. (66)

Today, even though more modern understandings of how diseases spread have somewhat altered this dynamic, failures in maintaining antiseptic cleanliness still carry with them a heavy burden of guilt and even shame. Female domestic laborers, like Concepcion, often find themselves mediating the guilt and responsibility of their white female employers.

Domestic Borderlands, Disposable Domestics, and Racial Otherness

Judith Rollins explores the sort of "middle-class mothering" that takes place in relationships between domestics and their employers. Central to Rollin's work are the hierarchical systems among women generated by domestic service situations and the psychological and material circumstances that sustain them. As Rollins points out, "continuing the trends of the nineteenth century, domestic service in the United States today is typically a female-female relationship made up of a white, middle-class employer and a migrant Third World employee" (59). Crucial to these relationships are material commercial products. Rollins writes of employers paying domestics in cast-off items such as beds, tables, refrigerators, leftover food, and old clothes (78). This form

of "payment in kind" is common practice in this occupation and is considered, by employers, one of the material compensations of domestic service. Items that are no longer useful in constructing white middle-class identity are cast off for the supposed use and payment of domestics whose acceptance of such treatment "proves" she deserves the treatment, which further justifies the attitude (Rollins 189). Importantly, these gifts of discarded items "serve to reify the differences between women—be they in terms of class, race, or human worth" (Rollins 193).

Rollins insists that domestic situations steeped in the dynamics of deference and maternalism, disguised behind apparently benevolent gestures, are highly beneficial to the employer at the psychological expense of the domestic (157). She argues that historically, as women increasingly took on the responsibilities of overseeing domestic employees, even as they were excluded from the economic sphere, their administrative roles took on "distinctively feminine" or maternalistic tones. In fact, Rollins asserts that deference giving remains one of the functions of the domestic servants; these situations act as validation of the employer's class status. Rollins goes even further, writing that "the menial, unintelligent, physically strong, irresponsible, weak-charactered servant provides a convenient contrast figure upon whom might be projected those aspects of herself most despised and feared . . . for this kind of role, the lower class black domestic, removed from the employer by class, culture, and color, might be particularly useful" (185).

While domestic technology and household chemicals might seem to be the tools of enslavement for female domestic laborers, in *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* they prove to be Concepcion's salvation. As mentioned earlier, exposure to household chemicals causes Pat Kramer to shrink rapidly, and Concepcion begins to reap the benefits almost immediately. Tomlin's relationship with her Hispanic maid betrays the problematic relationship the middle-class white woman has in sharing labor with her domestic help. Historically, distance between servant and mistress was established in several ways. Guidebooks on home service insisted on quiet and unobtrusive service and suggested wearing maid's uniforms or "livery." Daily baths and "immaculate undergarments" were also required as these were essential "foundations of morality" (Katzman 169). Livery served to announce the status of the employer as well and underscore the subordinate status of the employee in the home, in the community, and to the employees themselves. In

the film's beginning, Concepcion is the picture of subordination and submission; she is ordered around while wearing her hair up tightly in a bun, and she is always wearing an apron and a dowdy brown uniform. However, as Pat shrinks, Concepcion begins wearing her hair down and styled, lots of eye makeup and lip gloss, and eventually blue hot pants, gold chains and bracelets, and a flower in her hair. Gone are her "livery" and other signs of subordination. She also takes to dancing around the kitchen to loud Latin music and smoking in the house, much to the dismay of Judith Beasley.

Concepcion's lack of bodily comportment and outrageous expression of gender and cultural difference paint her as unfit for symbolic and literal citizenship. Out from under Pat's maternal supervision, Concepcion seems to be running amok, unable to respect white middle-class bodily and social boundaries. Her new "spitfire" persona poses sexual temptation to the sexually frustrated Vance, and her racially coded bad habits set a bad example for the Kramer children. In contrast, the shrinking Pat loses her sexual agency, as she has taken to literally living in a doll's house instead of her bedroom. Her husband Vance lies in bed reading *How To Live Without Sex*.

Pat's plight mirrors the fate of so many domestic laborers: she is infantalized. She is driven around the grocery store inside a shopping cart; she must bathe in the sink and is often abused and ignored. She has become a joke, her children's toys attack her, a Betsy-Wetsy doll "urinates" on her, and she must wear ridiculous doll clothes. Pat relinquishes the close relationship with her children displayed in the "Little Bar of Soap" scene and is now, because of her diminished size, also unable to properly supervise Concepcion. Perhaps this reversal of fortunes between Pat and Concepcion is best illustrated in one of *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* most memorable scenes. In a final act of utter abjection, Pat falls into the kitchen garbage disposal. Unaware of Pat's misfortune, Concepcion proceeds to throw her cigarette butts and the family's breakfast leftovers directly onto Pat. It is as if all of the "leftovers" and cast-offs that have historically been used to compensate domestic workers are violently unleashed onto Pat inside her miniature domestic dungeon. Concepcion's heavily racially coded performance in this scene paints her as hopelessly simpleminded and thoughtless. Her loud salsa music prevents her from hearing Pat's cries for help. Without Pat to manage her labor, Concepcion has turned the Kramer kitchen into a house of horrors.

It is because domestic womanhood has for so long been defined directly through the labor of women of color that Pat's "bad-white-body" betrayal is so ironic. She is treated as garbage in her own home and must watch as her white privilege follows her down the drain. The spatial reality of the garbage disposal, this kitchen borderland, underscores the symbolic marginalization of the white homemaker in this film. The audience is encouraged to share Pat's perspective in this scene, seeing her Hispanic maid as a monstrous racial other with the means, via the disposal, to obliterate her forever. Pat's family thinks she has been slaughtered when Concepcion turns on the garbage disposal, and they bury all that is left of her, her microscopic tennis shoe found at the edge of the sink, in the backyard in a matchbox. Pat is given all the respect of a deceased pet goldfish or gerbil.

In the third act of *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*, we learn that Pat has actually escaped the garbage disposal and has been kidnapped by the Organization for World Management, a corporate entity that intends to use her blood to shrink the world. She is imprisoned in a hamster cage inside a laboratory next to a large gorilla named Sidney. The bad-white science that created Pat Kramer's predicament now seeks to use her body to corrupt the bodies of large populations of consumers in order to be the only supplier of an antidote. Pat's only sympathetic friend is Sidney, a gorilla, who is himself a captive to white science. She recalls, "I knew I'd found a friend, there is something I'd felt in the big sweet gorilla that can only be described as human kindness. There had to be a way we could help each other." Indeed Sidney does help Pat, in a scene that is reminiscent of *King Kong* (1933):

> In King Kong the great white hunter (Carl Denham [Robert Armstrong]) and his heterosexual love interest (Ann Darrow [Fay Wray]) seek to capture a great black ape . . . Fay Wray's white female goddess Ann is made to appear whiter than white through lighting, blondness and clothing. But it is the threat of black male sexuality and miscegenation that blatantly reifies her whiteness. King Kong himself is a stand-in for the threat of black male sexuality.
>
> (Foster 8)

The Incredible Shrinking Woman parodies this classic colonial jungle film. In *King Kong*, a white woman is abducted by the symbolic racial other, embodied by the gorilla. Similarly, Pat uses Sidney to escape, literally riding out of the laboratory on his back. This scenario mimics the classic

construction of the white woman in peril that is such a staple of colonialist cinema but puts Pat in control of the situation. As Donna Haraway notes in her influential *Primate Visions*, displays of monkeys and apes have often been offered up as lessons in race, hierarchy, and dominance. Haraway's work exposes how scientific studies of nature have naturalized a myriad of hierarchies of power relating to women and minorities. The rescue scene in *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* plays off of persistent images of both scientific and popular racism. Pat literally has Sidney by the collar, using him as a means to escape her own situation of oppression, ironically mirroring her previous domestic situation with her Hispanic maid.

In the final scene, Pat returns home after being dropped by Sidney into a puddle of commercial products, this chemical soup restores her former self in the parking lot of her favorite shopping center. During this awkward dénouement, Pat reunites with Sidney, who has temporarily taken up residence in her home. "Can we keep him?" her children ask. Judith Beasley, predictably, disapproves, "Is that big monkey actually going to live in our neighborhood?" It seems that Sidney the ape will be integrated into the newly "normalized" white household as a sort of pet. The integration of the symbolic racial other in *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* is yet another act of "domestication" and mastery of the exotic other. And finally, everything seems to be back to normal in Tasty Meadow: Pat's body is tamed, Concepcion is back to her subservient self, and Judith is back to policing the "health" and racial integrity of the neighborhood.

In the decades since the production of this film, not much has changed. As suburban homes are largely replacing inner-city factories as places of economic incorporation of immigrant women, much contemporary scholarship on domestic service increasingly focuses on the globalization and the geographic distribution of service. Contemporary scholars of domestic service contend that the plights of immigrant domestic workers have much to tell us about the structural inequalities of our global economic system. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo's acknowledges that domestic work is still very much an underground or "shadow economy" with work situations remaining highly unregulated. She writes, "these contemporary work arrangements contradict American democratic ideals and modern contractual notions of employment" (Hondagneu-Sotelo x). Her book *Domestica* reveals how these fundamental tensions in American social life are played out in private homes, between the women who do the work and those that employ them. The global market in domestic servants of color

represents a new domestic world order, with the bodies of immigrant women of color becoming a new playing field of globalization.

Particularly, the work situations of contemporary domestics afford Latina women an unparalleled look at American affluence. "Unlike the working poor who toil in factories and fields, domestic workers see, touch, and breath the material and emotional world of their employers' homes" (Hondagneu-Sotelo xi). As always, consumer goods and material exchanges continue to play integral roles in domestic service. Hondagneu-Sotelo writes that "some employers try to snip off the price tags on new clothing and home furnishings before the Latina domestic workers read them because they fear the women will compare the prices of those items with their wages—which they invariably do" (xi). Like so many of the products we consume as Americans, domestic labor reproduces valuable effects in the form of clean houses and cared-for children, and like so many commercial items, the labor involved remains conveniently invisible in the objects of consumption and production. And, like every other source of production in the United States, domestic service has gone global as America's appetite for consumption of this commodity is growing.

The Incredible Shrinking Woman exposes how domestic service can be implicated as a manifestation of larger national and imperial projects. It displays the power dynamics that operate in deciding who does what type of work and who has access to the knowledge of how to "properly" use domestic technology. These decisions are not merely contingent upon gender, but on race and class as well. We have seen how a growing historic preoccupation with standards of cleanliness, domestic technology, and efficiency, along with the prevention of disease and the rise of the domestic educator/gatekeeper, have implications not only for the construction of gender in the home, but of race as well. *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* makes visible some of these racialized constructions of gender by its reversal of the domestic/employer relationship and its overall parody of consumerism. It does so by employing the scenario of the bad-white-body, a body that refuses to conform to the hegemonic standards of cinematic whiteness, a common trope of other science-fiction films. The segregationist tactics of the "block meeting" and the blatantly racist legacy the "Little Bar of Soap" scene exhibit how ridiculous these projects of constructing stable constructions of whiteness through constructed communities and consumerism really are. These come to light only through the shrinking of

Pat's body and her subsequent loss of power and status. This film's racial inversion reminds us of how our visual lexicon of race, with its often unproblemitized constructions of whiteness, persist even today. Exposing the constantly shifting face of commodity racism in the United States is a daunting task, but the contemporary political climate and the material reality of the conditions under which so many domestic workers live and work make such projects crucial.

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